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ABSTRACT

A progress report on "Building Work Skills through Volunteering," a demonstration project designed to use the volunteer experience to develop and practice work skills, is presented. The initial section describes the participants, methods, and materials at each of four sites: a private corporation, a suburban school district, a voluntary youth-serving agency, and a community corrections department. Six characteristics of adult learners and models of adult career development, decision making/problem solving, and career change stages which were considered in the development of the program framework are discussed. A description of program elements and processes is presented including: (1) volunteer recruitment and publicity; (2) applications, screening, and selection; (3) a seven-unit career planning workshop; (4) agency recruitment and referral; (5) agency job description development; (6) progress monitoring; (7) skill-building placements for volunteers; and (8) achievement awards and letters. A discussion of key concerns which have emerged includes: release time, workshop scheduling, costs for workshop materials, costs for skill-building placement activities, project staffing, participant selection, and benefits for employers. (DC)

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Building Work Skills through Volunteering.
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by
Marilyn Clark

November 1983

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Building Work Skills Through Volunteering

by Marilyn Clark

Introduction

This issue of Ideas for Action in Education and Work is a progress report on the demonstration project, "Building Work Skills Through Volunteering." The project's objectives were designed to help individuals and organizations use the volunteer experience as a strategy to develop and practice work skills. Four district sites are involved, representing different settings and participant groups. Essential features of developmental activities remain constant at each site; others vary in response to unique characteristics of participants and setting. Descriptions are given of each site and its participants, outlining the methods and materials used. Also described are aspects of career development, adult learning and volunteering that influenced the development of the project. As the work continues, we review the current status of the project and list some of the issues we'll be addressing in the coming months. Program strategies are common across most sites.

Site Descriptions

Private Enterprise

About 4,360 employees of this corporation work in six states around the Northwest. Over 560 of these employees volunteer on an occasional basis through an employee organization that matches needs of local agencies with the skills of the volunteers. A subcommittee of the Board was created to help design and carry out the project. The Board also committed $250 to cover the cost of printing announcements, workshop materials and certificates of achievement for those who successfully complete the program. Board members support volunteerism as a mechanism for improving performance, developing self-concept, furthering skill development and improving productivity.

Project progress is monitored by the Board and its subcommittee and by an advisory group comprised of representatives from voluntary agencies, local government, company human resource development personnel as well as representatives of other companies. The company provides conference rooms for meetings which are held during lunch hours.

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Special considerations for program design at this site included:

- Generating broad support inside the company for the project and its activities
- Scheduling project activities at times convenient for full-time employees
- Arranging release time from regular job duties to permit employee participation in project activities
- Communicating the benefits that accrue to the company by having employers participate in project activities

Suburban School District

In this medium-sized public school district of 6,391 students, volunteers are working closely with teachers and staff to improve instruction, enrich curriculum, enhance school/community relations and, in the case of senior citizen volunteers, help close the generation gap. A volunteer coordinator recruits volunteers and helps match individual talents with a wide range of instructional support and general school tasks.
As a result of budget cutbacks, more volunteers are needed by public agencies. With tight economic conditions, more school volunteers are beginning to think about entering the paid work force. The district volunteer coordinator worked closely with NWREL staff to implement the "Building Work Skills Through Volunteering" concepts. The district supports the costs of printing announcements, workshop materials and certificates of achievement for volunteers who complete the program.

This site was the first to implement all program strategies and many of the materials developed were pilot tested here. Special considerations for this site included:

- Scheduling project activities to fit with other school activities
- Accommodating a wide range of ages and prior experience
- Identifying project opportunities both inside and outside the school district for those whose interests extend beyond school volunteer opportunities

Voluntary Youth-Serving Agency

A long history of successful and effective use of volunteers made this agency a logical site to begin the design and testing of volunteering as a career development strategy. Agency personnel carefully train volunteers, moving them toward increased responsibility and recognition.

Basic program elements were modified and tested in workshop settings. These workshops proved invaluable to preparing appropriate materials that are being used at other sites. Experienced volunteers worked with NWREL staff to refine the process and tailor it to the specifics of the volunteer experience.

This agency provided classroom space and tuition assistance to those volunteers who wanted college credit for the career planning course.

Community Corrections Department

In this county's suburban and rural areas, ex-offenders are often sentenced to do volunteer work in nonprofit agencies. This service is restitution to the communities for the individual's violations of the law. County officials, concerned about rehabilitating their clients, take a strong interest in the potential career development benefit of the volunteer experience to the ex-offender.

With the involvement and support of the administrator, a job developer and a dedicated volunteer, program strategies are being adapted to suit the special needs of adult ex-offenders. A special consideration for this site was the need of each participant to get a paying job.

Developing a Model

A blend of two important concepts provided the framework for design of the model--a merger of planned career development and voluntary, meaningful community service. This combination is a potentially powerful strategy for bringing volunteer expertise to the delivery of community services. The strategy is further strengthened because it is based on what is known about adult growth and development and how adults learn.

Adult Career Development

Over the last fifteen years or so, the field of career and life planning has matured. Before that time, adult career guidance was thought by many to be remedial. Adults who expressed a need for a career change were thought to have missed something along the way--something they needed to go back and pick up. While most adults assumed they were preparing for a lifetime career, government statistics told a different story. U.S. labor statistics indicate that most people change jobs and/or career fields several times during their working lives. Some estimates now run as high as seven career changes for people now in or about to enter the labor force.

What accounts for the number of career changes individuals make? For some, a wrong choice was made at some point; the career did not prove to be satisfying and personally rewarding. For others, automation and advancing technology supplanted their jobs and careers. Still others reached a dead end point; there was no hope for growth, challenge or stimulation. And finally, there are those whose personal situations and goals changed.

Often, the latter is the most important reason for a career change. Not only does the world change and personal circumstances with it, but adults grow and change over time. A flexible approach to career planning and development seems more appropriate than simply trying to refine a decision made earlier in life. Emerging developmental approaches to adult career planning encompass the concepts of two stage-based models: 1) decision making/problem solving, and 2) career change stages. Following is a brief summary of each.

Decision Making/Problem Solving

1. Defining the problem
2. Generating alternatives
3. Gathering information
4. Developing information-seeking skills
5. Identifying useful sources of information
6. Processing information
7. Making plans and selecting goals
8. Implementing and evaluating plan

Source: B.W. Berland. "Career Planning: The Use of Sequential Evaluated Experience." In E.L. Herr (ed) Vocational Guidance and Human Development. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.

Career decisions are among the most significant people make. Understanding components of the decision making process and how to use them results in more satisfying outcomes.

Keeping in mind the preceding eight points, the following five stages of career change provide opportunities to put those processes to work.

Career Change Stages

1. Readiness: the building of vocational maturity, wherein the individual gains a social, physical, and psychological acceptance of the responsibility for implementing a career decision.

2. Awareness: the knowledge of self and the world of work.

3. Exploration: a systematic and planned inquiry into the world of work using a wide view and including an examination of different occupations.

4. Reality Testing: the balancing of choices within a risk-taking structure.

5. Confirmation: a particular time in which a career decision is confirmed.

Source: E.L. Herr and S.H. Cramer. Career Guidance Through the Life Span. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979.

As can be seen, the two models are mutually supportive.

What We Know About Adult Learning

Managers and leaders of volunteer programs with a training component and those who work with adult learners recognize some key considerations when designing programs:

- Adults bring a wide variety of experiences to the learning situation. Effective programs use this experience as a resource for learning and instruction.
- Adults have a wide range of responsibilities. Sometimes these responsibilities are in conflict with what they want to do or learn and sometimes they support the learning or provide motivation. An effective program will be sensitive to these potential conflicts and time demands and try to accommodate them.
- Adults have attained status in their community and social circles. An effective program will help adults maintain or build on these successes.
- Adults must make decisions and solve problems. When they seek out learning assistance, the learning must relate to problems and decisions they confront.
- Adults have many potential options, but are sometimes bewildered by these alternatives. An effective program will help adults sort out their options and choose among them.
- Adults view themselves as independent individuals. Sometimes they need a little prompting, but an effective program will provide a sounding board and a safe environment in which to try out new ideas.

There are many more characteristics of adult learners that could be listed here. But these are the major ones that blended with the stage models described previously to form a foundation for program design.

Volunteering — Considerations for Program Design

Today the typical volunteer is a busy person juggling many responsibilities. Just as they have more to do, they expect more from their volunteer experiences. As one volunteer coordinator said, "Stuffing envelopes just isn't enough." Volunteers who don't find satisfaction in the tasks they've been assigned look elsewhere for more meaningful ways to invest their time. Volunteer managers are also busier. Tight budgets and greater demands for services make for pressured days. Programs and agencies compete for the commitment of capable volunteers.

While altruism remains a large part of the motivation to volunteer for community service, many volunteers and volunteer managers are recognizing an equally strong reason for people to give their time and energy to unpaid work. Volunteers gain new skills, confidence and worthwhile experience through their service work. Many of these skill and confidence building experiences can transfer to paid work, as was learned in an earlier NWREL study. (See Ideas for Action in Education and Work, June 1982.)

The volunteer management sector is responding to the growing recognition that volunteers' motivations include the desire to try out new roles and responsibilities. Volunteer career development has become a popular topic for workshops. But how does an agency implement a volunteer career development program? What is a volunteer career development program?

From Theory to Practice

The questions of what a volunteer career development program should be and who it should serve were only two of the questions that had to be addressed by this project. A number of answers began to emerge. It became clear that most emerging practices were geared for helping volunteers accomplish two very important tasks: (1) to document previous volunteer experience in order to seek academic credit for college-level learning gained, and (2) to document and describe accomplishments during the volunteer

experience in order to build a resume or work history.

Learning and skills from the volunteer experience documented after the fact are recognized as valuable. Therefore, we reasoned, a volunteer experience planned in advance to incorporate work skill development may have even greater potential value. The demonstration project, "Building Work Skills Through Volunteering," is testing that hypothesis.

Program Elements and Processes

Charting a career direction is a challenging task for most people. The decision to enter training or tackle a new career field must be a thoughtful, reasoned one. For adults, these changes can be risky business. Advance planning and an opportunity to put tentative choices to a reality test were two concepts that seemed required in our model development. Other specifications included the following:

- Keeping in mind the needs of voluntary agencies for assistance
- Ease of starting and operating an ancillary program from the voluntary agency's point of view
- Not reinventing programs already in place and working
- Ability to refine the program as we progressed

A diagram of the program model developed for the demonstration project is included in this issue of Ideas for Action. This displays the processes used, the content of the activities, and the sequence in which they generally occurred. The following descriptions provide a brief overview of each boxed item in the diagram.

The Advisory Committee

One of the most important first steps in designing a program was to create an Advisory Committee at each site. This group included representatives of voluntary agencies and business and industry. Their responsibility was to guide the process by helping determine essential program components, identifying issues and suggesting approaches for addressing them. Members served as a sounding board for staff and volunteers' ideas and helped to refine those ideas through review and discussion of rough drafts.

Another Advisory Committee function was advocacy on behalf of the project with local businesses and service agencies.

Following is a description of the process the Advisory Committee and project staff developed and are pilot testing.

- Volunteer Recruitment and Publicity

  The program is most effective when participation is voluntary. Recruitment was done through in-person and telephone contacts, mailing of informational brochures and posters placed in public sites. Prospective volunteers were invited to an informational meeting where a description of the program and the planned activities was given. Time requirements were made clear, but emphasis was placed on participants negotiating a flexible and personally appropriate schedule for their activities.

- Applications, Screening and Selection

  A simple application form was filled out by interested volunteers. Applications were reviewed by the volunteer agency project coordinator and two Advisory Committee members. Information gathered included name; address; day and evening telephone numbers; current volunteer or paid position; previous volunteer activities; tentative career development or work skill development interests; and time preferences for workshop meetings and project activities.

- Career Planning Workshop

  A workshop titled "Career Redirection for Adults" was

offered in six three-hour sessions. This workshop had been adapted for use in 1982 with the cooperation of staff and volunteers of the regional unit of a national youth- serving organization. The content included material drawn from the seven units described in the following.

Unit I What is Important to Me?

Introduces adult life stages as a framework for assessing values, working toward balance in one's life, analyzing use of time, and keeping a journal as an aid to reflecting on the issues and experiences of the workshop.

Unit II Interest Assessment: What Do I Enjoy?

Introduces Holland's "people and environments" themes and interest surveys. Includes a journal activity.

Unit III Skill Assessment: What Do I Do Well?

Introduces assessment of job-specific and functional/transferable skills with an emphasis on identification of preferred skills and abilities and their implications for career choice. Includes assessment of skills gained through volunteering.

Unit IV The Great Leap: From Self-Understanding to Action

Summarizes self-assessment results; introduces concept of exploring careers through volunteer work and on-site interviews of resource persons in the community. Reviews and provides opportunities for practicing communications skills for interviewing.

Unit V Career Exploration: Comparing the Real and the Ideal

Evaluates exploration interview information; uses the information for selecting job areas for further exploration through a volunteer project.

Unit VI Personal Job Readiness: Overcoming Barriers

Focuses on identifying and overcoming barriers to implementing career change; includes confidence-building and self-contracting for change; introduces decision making.

Unit VII Implementation: It's Time for Action

Introduces resume preparation and practices job interviewing skills, develops plan for volunteering as career development, considers desirable work settings for applying current and new skills.

- Agency Recruitment and Referral

Brochures and personal contacts became the primary avenues for identifying and recruiting volunteer-using agencies to host volunteers' skill-building activities. Many of the personal contacts came through the local Volunteer Bureau and from volunteer program managers well acquainted with current volunteer opportunities. Informational meetings were held more frequently as the numbers of individuals needing placements increased. During the meetings, the project's purpose was discussed. The role of the volunteer-using agency was described along with clarification of expectations for both the volunteer participants and those who supervise them. An orientation meeting was held with each agency planning to host a volunteer. This meeting offered a chance to discuss specifics of the placement. The agency's objectives and job description requirements were reviewed.

- Agency Job Description Development and Progress Monitoring

Participating agencies were encouraged to develop job descriptions for all volunteer

jobs. The format and information in the volunteer job description is similar to any description of a paid position, and can include the following:

Position Title
Agency and Department (for which the work is to be done)
Supervisor (title of the person who gives direction)
Duties (responsibilities and activities of the position)
Requirements (personal qualities, education, or experiences)
Duration of Job (how long this position lasts)
Schedule (hours, days of the week or month)

Once the volunteer began working on the negotiated task, periodic reviews of work progress were held. These are relatively informal, but results should be recorded in the volunteer's file. A form to guide this process has proved helpful during the demonstration project. Feedback to the volunteer has been important in building the commitment of the volunteers to completing the task and developing a sense of teamwork between the volunteer and the host organization staff.

- Monitoring Progress

Project staff and Advisory Committee members monitored both the process of project development and the progress of component activities. Information was gathered formally and informally. Applications from prospective volunteers and descriptions of agency missions and needs for projects are part of the written or formal information gathered. In addition, volunteers completed the Career Directions Inventory at program entry and again at program exit. A self-assessment method for identifying changes in transferable/functional skills proficiency is being explored.

- Skill Building Placements for Volunteers

By the end of the Career Planning Workshop, participants had identified their career goals. They also had assessed their skills and identified those they need to acquire in order to reach their career goals. For employed participants, current job responsibilities often do not offer opportunities to learn or polish new skills. Unemployed participants, too, lacked a setting through which to gain new skills. A structured, well-planned volunteer work experience designed around the individual's skill development needs and the programmatic or administrative needs of the volunteer-using agency was the central strategy of this model. A learning contract provided a focus for negotiating specific skill-building activities. Outcomes were planned that provided ready documentation of the quality, content and duration of the skill-building placement. These outcomes sometimes changed as the projects proceeded, but the outcome continued to be important for evaluating the effectiveness of the placement and documenting the skill-building that had occurred.

Projects included development of public relations campaigns and tools, newsletters, a curriculum for art history, fund raising activities and mentoring a youth volunteer project.

- Achievement Awards and Letters

Upon successful completion of the skill-building placements, the Project Advisory Committee and staff prepared a letter of congratulations. The letter stated the participants' skill-building objectives in specific, work-related terms. It gave details of the products or outcomes. At the request of the employed participant, a copy of the letter was sent to the immediate supervisor and/or to the personnel files. Most agencies

provide or plan to provide certificates of achievement to the volunteer participants in recognition of their service and accomplishments.

This issue of Ideas for Action, as previously mentioned, is a progress report on the work to date. Evaluative information is still being gathered and analyzed. During this process, new issues and questions are emerging and answers are being sought. Following are a few key concerns.

- Release time

  Many proposed activities needed to be done during business hours. Some volunteers were able to negotiate time off--generally an extra hour associated with a lunch break, starting or quitting times. Others were not able to negotiate time off. Most participants found that agencies were flexible and very willing to accommodate the scheduling needs of the employed volunteer.

- Workshop scheduling

  The Career Planning Workshop schedule must suit volunteers' schedules. Lunch hours, combined with evenings and an occasional Saturday morning, appeared best for some employed volunteers. Other volunteers preferred meeting during school hours to avoid child care costs.

- Costs for workshop materials

  Materials used in the workshops cost about $25.00 per participant. This included most assessments. Sponsoring organizations generally photocopied the workshop materials and provided them to participants.

- Costs for skill-building placement activities

  For the most part, host agencies were able to provide the funds or materials required to carry out the project. On occasion, part of the volunteer's activity was to generate financial support for the work.

- Staffing the project

  In each field test site, a staff member or experienced volunteer staffed the project, working closely with the NWREL staff. The on-site staff person completed an orientation to the career planning workshop and participated in the first sessions to learn how to lead the workshop. Subsequent sessions are then conducted by the sponsoring organization's staff or volunteer.

- Participant selection

  Participation in any career development or skill development activity is most effective when it is voluntary. Individuals considering participation in this project were asked to commit approximately 24 hours over five or six weeks to complete the Career Planning Workshop. They were also asked to commit an additional 30 or more hours to completing a negotiated skill-building project with a community agency. These requirements result in some degree of self-selection.

- A second selection issue exists related to the skill development interests of the individual. If project staff view the skill area as unlikely to be available from a community service agency, they must advise the applicant. In most instances, other interests can be pursued.

- Benefits of participation for employers

  In assessing the benefits employers derived from involvement with this kind of activity, the corporate representatives concluded that the benefits include:

  Visible volunteer assistance to deserving social service projects and agencies

Recognition and reputation for positive community involvement

A pool of employees with increased skills and experience

Increased individual and company social awareness

An appropriate structure for employee involvement in addressing community concerns

Higher employee morale for those who volunteer their energies to a meaningful endeavor

Over the coming months, NWREL staff, agency and demonstration site representatives will continue work on this project. Activities and materials will be revised and retested A how-to-do-it guidebook is planned.

We invite reader response to the ideas presented. Your comments and questions help us identify the emerging concerns of practitioners and thus assure more useful products.

To comment or to request more information, please contact:

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Editor's Note

IDEAS FOR ACTION IN EDUCATION AND WORK synthesize information from research and practice on topics of current interest. Other titles in the series include:

Removing Barriers to CETA/School Collaboration (out of print)

Improving Learning in the Workplace

Teaching Independent Living Skills to Youth

Volunteering...Pathway to Paid Employment

Striving for Excellence: Middle Schoolers Study "Work"

Learning Responsibility: The Importance of the Home, School and Workplace

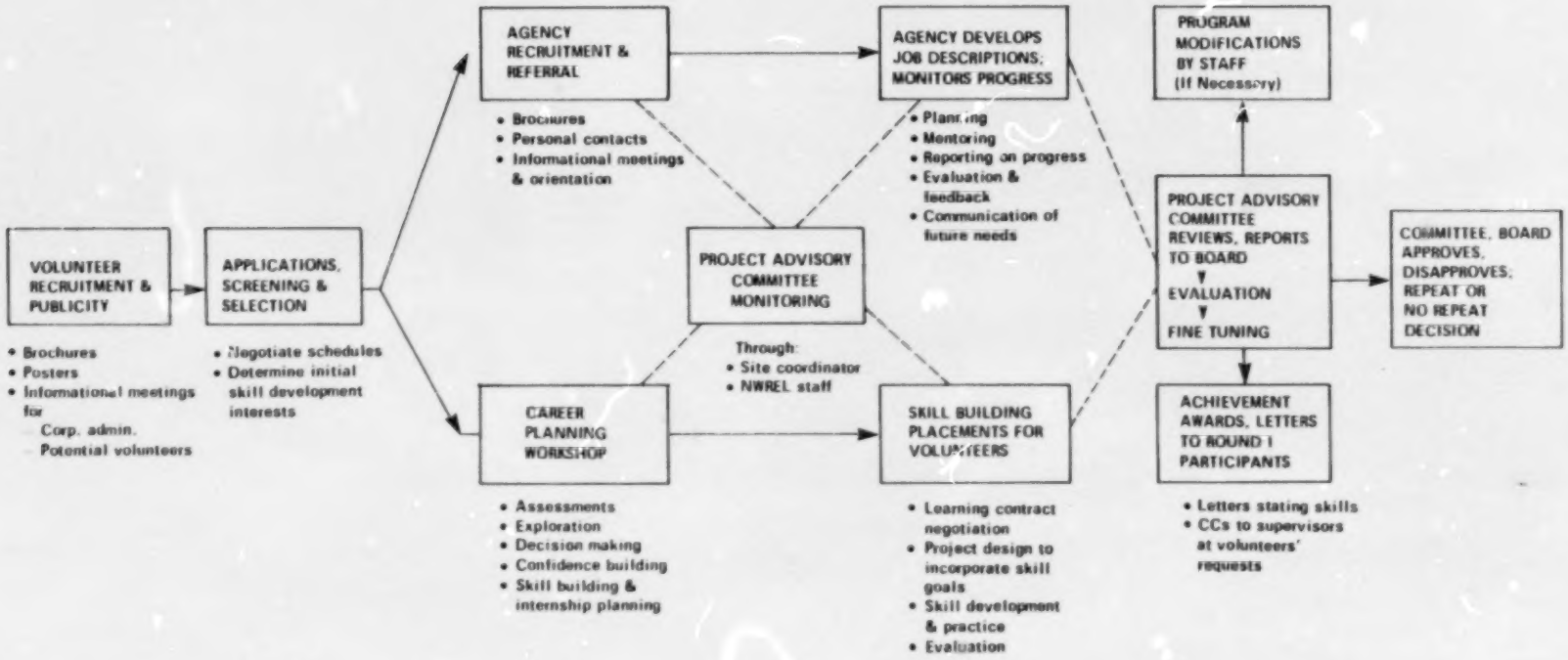
Northwesterners Out of Work: The Human Costs of Unemployment

Northwesterners Out of Work: The Effects of Job Dislocation

Choices for Migrant Youth

For further information, please contact Larry McClure, Program Director, or Andrea Hunter, Youth Coordinator, Education and Work Program, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 300 S.W. Sixth Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97204, 1-800-547-6339 (toll free) or (503) 248-6800.

DESIGN MODEL FOR BUILDING WORK SKILLS THROUGH VOLUNTEERING PROJECT



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